

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Preached July 1, 2018; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

The word 'Gospel' means 'good news', though that is a rather weak rendering of the real meaning. Still, it is clear that life is not just a matter of 'good news', but the Gospel does have the last word, as well as the first. The good news is that we were created in the image of God; the bad news is that we have sinned; the good news is that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ as our Savior. The good news is that we have a King, Jesus Christ; the bad news is that we have a battle on our hands; the good news is that Christ has already won the victory and we need but enter into his victory.

Turning now to today's 1st reading we find a line that might seem like pure 'good news'.

The creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is not a destructive drug among them, nor any domain of the netherworld on earth.

This sounds nice; it is the sort of thing we often hear when people justify themselves by saying, "That is the way God made me," the implication being that therefore it is good, that the way things are simple speaking is 'good'. That, however, would be a radical misunderstanding of Scripture and also false to our experience of reality. Even careful attention to the whole of our 1st reading today shows us that in the created world came forth good from the hand of God the Creator, but has been corrupted through the envy of the devil (who is himself a creature of God) and the collaboration of human beings. The world of our experience, then, is mixed; it is not an experience of the pure goodness of creation, but neither is it an experience of pure evil. Rather, we experience a world that has been created good, but has been marred by the moral evil of sin.

We can see how this plays out in the realm of the physical environment of our planet earth. If there is something that we should all have learned from the advances of environmental sciences it is that the earth is made up of complex ecosystems in which each part contributes to the working of the whole system. In that context we end up calling things 'harmful' or 'bad' – like wolves - only because in the wrong circumstances they are capable of hurting us, but otherwise they have a part to play in the whole ecosystem in which they naturally exist.

No, I don't want to say that everything that happens in nature is simply speaking 'good'. God did not set us upon this earth as some sort of alien being, as a predatory species, but as stewards of his creation. That means we rightly exercise our stewardship when we try to understand the nature of things and work to assist nature, both to maintain itself and serve our needs. We abuse our stewardship when

we seek to replace nature or refashion nature according to our own desires or fancies.

When we meet with wanton and whole-scale environmental degradation, we see the abuse of our stewardship and the entrance the 'domain of the netherworld' upon the earth. We also have the experience of how an unwitting or misguided alteration of one element in an ecosystem can have unforeseen and unintended destructive effects.

In a general way, we see all of this fairly readily in relation to the non-human world, though we might be baffled by the complexity of individual problems, or blinded by our own greed, ambition, and lust for power. The environmental movement was born by way of a reaction, recognizing the destructive side effects of the drive for man's 'mastery over nature' that dominated much of the 19th and 20th centuries and continues to this day.

Of course we have also derived many benefits and conveniences from the drive for mastery over nature and we have even come to be dependent on some of these benefits and conveniences. This in turn makes it difficult to resolve the problems of the destructive side effects.

Nevertheless, what we have still failed to recognize is that human beings also belong to the order of nature; that there is also a human nature; that there is a proper human 'ecology' that is even more complex in its working than the ecosystems of non-human nature. Human ecology, which could be called 'culture', involves a complex interweaving of instinct and intelligence, nature and nurture, moved one way or another by the free choices of countless human beings. Whether you want to or not, by your every choice you are casting a vote, one way or another, in the great cultural battle.

Now I would dare say that we have been living during a time of an unprecedented war on humanity in which human ecology has been dangerously compromised. Through the envy of the devil a true 'culture of death' has entered into human life in this world. The drive for 'mastery over nature' has continued in the drive for mastery over human nature. This involves the reckless alteration of human nature through such things as contraceptive pills and in vitro fertilization, to the growing attempt to substitute or replace human nature through 'artificial intelligence'.

Passing over the raw industrial sewage of pornography that is being dumped into the stream of human cultural, let us consider just the role of contraceptive pills.

Procreation, nurturing, and education of new human life obviously play a key role in any human ecology, in any healthy culture. Indeed, 'culture' could be defined as a system of human social life that passes on a way of life from one generation to the next; this involves teaching what it means to be human and what it means to be a man or a woman.

From a standpoint of faith, but in conformity with what we can grasp by sound and sane reason, human reproduction involves collaboration with the creative power of God. A human father and mother put themselves at the service of God, who completes their act by creating a new immortal soul, in his own image.

In this light, marriage, as a life-long union between one man and one woman, is meant to serve the procreation and education of children by ensuring, as much as possible, that children are brought into the world by the loving, committed union of their parents, and nurtured and educated first and foremost by those same parents. In marriage, the loving union of man and woman and the begetting of children are meant to go hand in hand.

Enter the introduction of hormonal contraception, which has the sole purpose of separating sexual union and procreation. It was first justified as a means by which married parents could control the number of children in their family. This was part of man's technological mastery of his own nature.

Separating sexual union and procreation, however, has had far reaching effects on the whole of human ecology, the whole of culture, the whole way in which the two sexes think about themselves and relate to each other; because of its cultural impact, contraception affects everyone, whether they use it or not.

By separating sexual union and procreation, contraception made it easy to separate sexual union and marriage. What could be wrong with sex outside marriage, so long as there is mutual consent and care is taken to avoid pregnancy or disease? That is the 'sexual morality' that is taught in public schools; it is also the focus of all public discussion 'sexual morality'; everything revolves around consent to individual acts, while marriage and procreation hardly even enter the picture. The same mentality is reflected in the popular culture of music, movies, and television.

All of this has broken down the stigma against having sex outside of marriage and as a consequence, has radically changed the way women view their own sexuality. Since women are the ones who get pregnant, they will naturally be more careful about engaging in sex and will naturally be more concerned about having a committed partner. Once they can control, or think they can control their ability to get pregnant or not, the door opens to seek sexual pleasure purely for its own sake. This is not necessarily a benefit for the woman, because it soon happens that men expect women to be readily available for them.

This changed dynamic in the relationship between men and women is the real underlying cause of what has led us to the #metoo movement.

Further, the separation of sexual union and procreation, resulting from the introduction of the contraceptive pill has changed ways of thinking about homosexuality. Since fertility is no longer automatically connected with sex,

intrinsically infertile sex is seen the same way as sex to which fertility can be 'added'. Same sex 'marriage' would have been unthinkable without the pill.

The separation of sexual union and procreation by means of the pill also opened the door for "in vitro" fertilization. If sex can be sought purely for its own sake, then why not seek procreation without sex? Procreation without sex, though, turns human life into a product of the human laboratory. Man's mastery over his own nature comes to mean the mastery over some individuals, the laboratory products, by others, the doctors and technicians of the fertility clinics; once human life becomes a product, then it can also be sold.

Let me add that if it is legitimate to regard a single human being as a commercial product, then it is legitimate to regard any human being (that included you and me) as commercial products. It is just a matter of who has the power.

There is so much more that could be said here, but since this is a matter of the disruption of human ecology, those most affected are the young, the children. Behind much of the suffering of innocent children lies the disordered sexual lives of adults; for starters the most common reason why a child grows up without the presence of both a father and a mother involves some form of sex outside of marriage. On top of all this, because of the contraceptive culture, children are now growing up with scarcely any idea of what it means to be a man or a woman, or what might possibly be a right sort of relationship between the sexes, or of what love is, what romance is, and what marriage is all about.

50 years ago on July 25, 1968, Blessed Pope Paul VI, soon to be canonized by Pope Francis, reiterated the Church's traditional condemnation of contraception in his famous encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*. He also warned of the evils that would come from its widespread acceptance. He warned of marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards; he warned that "a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and ... reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires"; he also warned of how governments would promote contraceptive practices. (*Humanae Vitae* 17) If anything, he understated the evils that would arise from the acceptance of contraception.

So much for the 'bad news'; now for the 'good news'.

In today's Gospel we meet with a woman with the flow of blood, deeply wounded in her experience of womanhood, who came through the crowd, touched the clothes of Jesus, and was cured. Jesus commends her for her faith.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, at the beginning of the section on the sacraments, in a commentary on an ancient fresco depicting this very Gospel scene, teaches, "The sacraments of the Church now continue the works which Christ had performed during his earthly life. The sacraments are as it were 'powers that go

forth' from the Body of Christ to heal the wounds of sin and to give us the new life of Christ. This image thus symbolizes the divine and saving power of the Son of God who heals the whole man, soul and body, through the sacramental life."

In a time when the domain of the netherworld has extended widely over the earth and throughout human society, when the physical environment of the earth had been badly damaged, when the human ecology of marriage and family has been devastated, a strong faith is necessary – a faith open to the life-giving power of God, rather than a 'contraceptive' faith that has sterilized itself through a utilitarian way of thinking – we need a strong faith that reaches out towards the sacraments the way the woman in today's Gospel reached out to touch Jesus. Only Jesus Christ can save us from the mess we have made for ourselves.